

Academic Leadership: The Online Journal

Volume 5

Issue 2 Summer 2007

Article 7

7-1-2007

Initiating Your Successful Transition to School Principal

Timothy Glasspool

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Glasspool, Timothy (2007) "Initiating Your Successful Transition to School Principal," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol5/iss2/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Academic Leadership: The Online Journal by an authorized editor of FHSU Scholars Repository.

Academic Leadership Journal

Introduction

Ø According to The Bureau of Labor and Statistics, principal job opportunities should be excellent because a large proportion of educational administrators are expected to retire over the next 10 years (2006).

Ø According to a 2002 one-question survey conducted by The National Association of Elementary and Secondary Principals, 66% of its membership indicated they plan on retiring in the next 6-10 years (2002).

Ø According to the Northeast Regional Elementary School Principal's Council, over 42% of principals and assistant principals in 9 Northeastern states plan to retire within the next five years (2006).

Ø According to the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry, during the 10-year period from 2004-2014 elementary and secondary school administration positions will experience a 10.3% increase (2004).

Ø According to the author's study of Pennsylvania high school principals, 15% or 126 Pennsylvania secondary schools hired a new principal during the 2005-2006 school year and 85 of the hires were first year high school principals (2006).

Are you ready to transition to a Principalship? The job outlook and opportunities for advancement in the near future are excellent. If you are ready; you are not alone. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, 3130 K-6 Elementary and 7-12 Secondary Administrative certificates and Principal K-12 certificates were issued from July 2000 – June 2006. More specifically, 1063 Principal K-12 certificates were issued from July 2005 – June 2006 (2006).

Your appointment to a Principalship is only the beginning of your journey. The first steps begin with your first year as building level leader. I desired to investigate those first-steps of principals who have made the transition from assistant principal to principal to learn from their mistakes, insights, reflections, and accounts. I expanded my desires into a study which I believe could benefit other aspiring, first year, and even veteran principals. My study entailed an examination of role ambiguity and conflict, challenges and expectations, and realities of high school principals moving from assistants to building level principals. The investigation identified the challenges high school assistant principals encountered when assuming a Principalship. To accomplish the study, 35 first year public high school principals were surveyed and 10 interviewed in May near the end of their first year. The majority of the participant principals were seasoned educators with 68.5 percent of them serving in public education for more than ten years, and 100 percent serving as assistant principals for at least three years. The study focused on self-evaluation and programmatic influences on the Principalship.

The Paradigm Shift

The role and responsibilities of the principal and assistant principal have developed and been redeveloped to meet demands and legislative impact on the American public education system. With these additional demands, principals are required to lead students and faculties to greater educational outcomes and achievement. As the role of building level leadership evolves and more principals become instructional leaders first and a managers second, opportunities for changing roles could correct assistant principal pigeon-holing. Some researchers and practioners do not agree the assistant principal position is an appropriate training ground for the Principalship. Even some principals and researchers believe the training ground is inadequate. Educational leadership students seeking principal certification and university professors both agree that a gap in formalized instruction between the practical and theoretical exists (Hart, 1993). It is also argued that experience more than educational training influence succession success. Prior training only affords assistants the opportunity to become a principal in title alone. Educational researchers believe a new leadership style is necessary to advance school systems into the accountability era (Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2003; Sergiovanni, 1996; Ubben, 2001). The demands and pressures of the job may cause principals to revert back to the practice of administration and school management rather than focusing on instruction as their pre-service education insists (Anderson, 1963; Hart, 1993; Porter, 1996). This new accountability era includes a blend of management and leadership skills as the previously cited researchers identified as a common strain of leader characteristics and skill sets: specifically a proactive vision of the future, communication amongst constituents, strong ties toward instructional practices, and an importance placed upon interpersonal relationships.

Succession and Socialization of the Principalship

Principal succession is a highly complex process with effects altering the course of people and school systems. The long standing study of succession is substantial in its quantity and quality of research and researchers. Contextual issues, such as size, successor route, and support systems, vary between and among successions and those issues directly affect the succession. Succession parameters are categorized into two broad categories: professional socialization and organizational socialization. *Professional socialization* deals with specialized knowledge and skills, as well as professional ethics, whereas organizational socialization encompasses knowledge, values, and norms of specific organizations (Duke, 1984; Greenfield, 1984; Hart, 1993). Professional socialization can begin as principals begin their careers as teachers, or may not start until their formal preparation programs, or will develop as they interact with other administrators. Professional socialization is a combination of formal and informal training that varies from state to state and is highlighted by certifying universities at the criteria of government agencies. Criteria affecting professional socialization are three-fold: knowledge, skills, and preparation. *Organizational socialization* binds members together into communities based on previous experiences that are stronger than formal structure or hierarchy. Optimism, honesty, and consideration (or a concern for people) combined with understanding relationships, both formal and informal, control a principals effectiveness to influence change in a building. Cultural and traditional influences may derail an attempt by a principal successor to be successful, carry out roles and responsibilities, or implement change (Sergiovanni, 1996). Elements of these influences include social capital, trust, channels for new information, norms, expectations, change, and sanctions. Effective school systems emphasize the need to build trusting social relationships and the need for principals to build trusting relationships with parents, students, and most especially teachers. The transitional supports provided by a district are also important succession specific criteria. *Transition assistance* provided to first year succession principals is instrumental in

helping them meet organizational and professional challenges. Informal processes and expectations dominate a principal's first year experiences. These informal experiences include discovering norms and expectations from their predecessors, secretaries, other district principals, and the central office. There are several avenues for new principals to focus their efforts for successful transition into a new building. Criteria affecting transition assistance include assimilation into the system, contexts, and role awareness.

Findings

1. Organizational Socialization

The importance of organizational socialization skills and their predominate importance on success in the succession year was realized. The study's data indicates that as a succession principal assumes his or her role the transition and actions surrounding the transition are more focused on organizational issues than professional issues. Most notably, the study's data identified *communication and listening skills and establishing trust* as the most important aspects of a principals first year. Additionally, principals stated they focused most of their attention to these pursuits. Clearly indicated in the study was the importance of contextual issues surrounding principal succession. Issues not necessarily given consideration before accepting a position may not be closely calculated by principals accepting a Principalship. These issues include *interpersonal relationships, trust, predecessor vacancy, district and school direction, internal or external candidacy, culture, climate, tradition, accountability, and expectations*. Principals indicated a need to devote more time and effort to organizational socialization issues, namely *communication and listening skills, interpersonal interactions, conflict resolution, climate and cultural issues, and trust*.

2. Professional Socialization

Principals indicated the most important areas of focus within professional socialization were *principles of teaching and learning*. This indicates principals are cognizant of their main purpose as educational leadership research affirms: to supervise the quality of instruction and student development. In a year marked by uncertainty, managerial challenges, and important personal connections, principals indicated they spent a significant amount of their day on the principles of teaching and learning. However, additional results from the study suggest *student management and school law* are issues still affecting the position relegating much of the principals' time to management duties. The data also indicated the *training ground of assistant principal and university coursework is adequate to address issues of professional socialization*.

3. Principal Preparation

Principals answered a number of questions concerning the importance of coursework and experience in preparing them to handle issues of professional and organizational socialization. When presented with open-ended questions about pre-service preparation principals compared their coursework to experience. *In 100 percent of the interviews each principal said their prior experience was more helpful than coursework*. When asked a follow-up question about their time as an assistant principal, 100 percent of the principals said *their service as an assistant principal was more helpful than their years of other service*. The data suggested the assistant principal role was instrumental to the successor's professional development and enabled transition to building level leader. As an assistant

principal works with the unattractive duties of his or her role, grooming and mentorship of the individual is instrumental in retaining valuable assistants and preparing a successor. The study's results agree with the body of research that believes the *training ground of assistant principal is adequate preparation for those succeeding to a Principalship*. The principals indicated a deeper understanding of the scope of the Principalship and how a school system functions due directly to their service as an assistant principal. The survey and interview results indicated *experience, specifically as an assistant principal, to be more helpful than coursework* during the succession year. Principals also indicated the challenges and expectations are known and the training is adequate, but the rigor of the position and the demands still exist.

The study's data indicated professional socialization issues addressed through university *coursework was adequate*. The data revealed years of public school service, tenure as a teacher and assistant principal, and coursework focus on the professional side of socialization. Rooted in preparation and experiences are opportunities for succession principals to advance their socialization skills; the not-so-obvious skills often proving the most useful. The data strongly suggested that *prior experience was significantly more helpful during their succession year than coursework in terms of succession preparation*.

4. Transition Assistance

Transition assistance provided to first year succession principals is instrumental in helping them meet organizational and professional challenges. The study affirmed the research that informal processes and expectations dominate a principal's first year, and that experience, relationship, and interrelationship issues are of the most challenging to principals. *One hundred percent of the principals reported they desired support from the central office to address these challenges*. The most frequent supports provided by central office to principals were: administrative meetings, professional organization affiliation, and conferences or workshops. These types of supports are most closely associated with professional socialization. The most frequently desired supports were: induction, orientation, and mentorship. These types of supports are most closely associated with organizational socialization. From results of the study it is reasonable to say the systems in place and *supports provided by the central office leave principals feeling conflicted*. Furthermore, many new principals indicated they were hesitant to ask for assistance since it may be taken as a sign of weakness or would afford those on the hiring committee an opportunity to second guess the appointment. The study's data suggested school districts should evaluate how and by what means they are supporting their new principals. Suggestions for principals, from succession principals, include developing collegial attitudes, focusing on school climate, and collaborative decision-making to combat an unsupportive support system.

5. Performance Expectations

The principals stated that central office *expectations were reasonable; however, the transition to building principal was still more difficult than expected*. The pressures and challenges of the position did not necessarily come from the central office or evaluating supervisors, *the challenges derived from stakeholders at the building level*. The principals agreed the level of support from central office was as anticipated, their job description was accurate, and they understood their decision making boundaries. It is reasonable to surmise that general expectations were met and few overwhelming surprises existed during the succession year. *One hundred percent of the surveyed principals attributed the ability to*

overcome the building level challenges to their pre service experiences and tenure as an assistant principal. Interestingly, the principals indicated the prime difference between being a principal or an assistant is how the level of accountability and responsibility was greatly manifested with their Principalship.

Conclusion

School leaders deciding where and when to assume a Principalship should examine all aspects of the position before taking the leap to chief school official. Simply being offered a Principalship is not necessarily reason enough. Asking a considerable number of questions around the contextual issues of the succession, accountability, and expectations, a candidate is more informed thus more prepared to succeed. The issues a principal cannot outwardly see or anticipate will create the most challenges. Challenges such as inter and intrapersonal relationships, conflict resolution, and establishing trusting relationships was a significant tone of the data. The study's results legitimized the notion that job stressors are heightened in the first year, and even the most prepared and experienced candidate may be not fully prepared for all challenges. Despite the challenges and often arduous road to succession principal and veteran principal, the excitement and passion for the position continues to magnetize educators to the principalship. Preparing principals to meet the demands of an unforeseen and unknown future continues to challenge those who desire a Principalship, those who hire and support principals, and those who certify principals.

References

- Anderson, L. (1963). *Secondary school administration*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Bureau of Labor and Statistics. (2006, August). *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- Duke, D., Isaacson, N., Sagor, R., and Schumuck. (1984). *Transition to leadership: An investigation of the first year of the principalship*. Portland, OR: Lewis and Clark College, Transition to leadership project.
- Elmore, R. (2000). *Building a new structure for school leadership*. Washington D.C.: The Albert Shaker Institute.
- Fullan, M. (2003). *Leadership with a vengeance*. New York: Routler Falmer.
- Glasspool, T. (2006). *Socialization of Pennsylvania high school principal succession*. (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2006). Available online at http://etd.library.pitt.edu/ETD/available/etd-11102006-063809/unrestricted/01_glasspool_11-15-06.pdf.
- Greenfield, W. (1985). *Being and becoming a principal: Responses to work contexts and socialization process*, AERA annual conference (reprinted). Chicago.

Hart, A. (1993). *Principal succession: Establishing leadership in Schools*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

National Association of Elementary School Principals (n.d., Archives). *NAESP Fact Sheet on the Principal Shortage*. Retrieved March 1, 2007 from the NAESP web site <http://www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=1097/>.

Northeast Regional Elementary School Principal's Council. (September, 2006). *NRESP annual conference report*. Providence, Rhode Island.

Porter, J. (1996). What is the role of the middle level assistant principal, and how should it change? *NASSP Bulletin*, 80(578), 25-30.

Pennsylvania Department of Education. (2006). *Bureau of Teacher Certification Annual Report*. Harrisburg, PA.

Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry. (2004). *Pennsylvania Occupational Outlook Handbook*. Harrisburg, PA: Center of Workforce Information.

Sergiovanni, T. (1996). *Leadership for the schoolhouse*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Ubben, G., Hughes, L., Norris, C., (2001). *The principal: Creative leadership for effective schools (4 ed.)*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

VN:R_U [1.9.11_1134]